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ABSTRACT

This paper explores strategies by which adults can intervene in children's play activities. The five intervention strategies discussed focus on (1) time and space, (2) adult guidance, (3) play materials, (4) boundaries, and (5) roles. The first strategy involves providing time and space in daily schedules and environments for children to play. The second strategy requires teachers and parents to sensitively offer oral prompts and direct involvement cues as children play. The third strategy calls for the provision of a variety of play materials. In the fourth strategy parents and teachers use demonstration and practice to show children how to enter and leave play situations. The fifth strategy requires adults to allow children to decide upon their own play themes and define and assign their own roles; however, it permits adults, at times, to suggest play themes for specific instructional purposes and rotate children in roles to assure that all have the opportunity to participate. It is suggested that the combination of the five intervention strategies with Parten's model of the development of play behavior (from onlooker to solitary, parallel, associative and cooperative stages) provides a complete intervention model for use with young children at play. Examples that illustrate the employment of intervention strategies at each of Parten's stages are provided. (Author/RH)

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Intervening in Child's Play

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Intervening in Child's Play

Overview

The use of intervention and guidance by adults who guide young children at play is not new to early childhood (Singer, 1973; Axline, 1947). The new twists characteristic of current approaches to play intervention emphasize the importance of imaginative play to children's intellectual (as well as social/emotional) growth. These new twists and contemporary views rest on a number of research-supported assumptions concerning the importance of intervention and imaginative play in young children.

First, play--specifically pretend, imaginative or make-believe play--is defined as the children's ability to change themselves into other individuals, situations, and events as observed through their verbal and/or motoric actions (Curry & Arnaud, 1974). In this sense, imaginative play is viewed as a necessary ingredient of intellectual growth (Piaget, 1962). Playing "Wonder Woman," "Daddy," "cat," "tree" or "Tooth Fairy" requires the youngster to view himself "as if" he is another. The mental capacity to image in "as if" form links imaginative play with intellectual processes. Second, play, and especially make-believe play for children from low income populations, is often underdeveloped (Smilansky, 1968). Differences between children in their use of imaginative play can be explained by variations in the quality and quantity of play things found in the youngsters' environment.

Third, imaginative play actions and activities can be constructively shaped, reinforced and trained in varying degrees:

a. through manipulation of the quality and quantity of play materials in the child's environment;

b. by increasing the opportunities for youngsters to use and show play; and,

c. through teachers and parents suggestions aimed at encouraging playful interactions between youngsters and their play environments (Yawkey & Fox, 1981).

Results from several studies show that guiding children in playing fairy tales such as "Three Little Pigs" and "Three Billy Goats Gruff" and in playing prior experiences, for example, "Going Shopping in East Mall" and "Visiting the Circus" encourage significantly their imagination, playfulness, and intellectual abilities. In addition, through adult guidance in imaginative play, oral language growth for these children improves substantially (Pellegrini, 1980).

Linking play to intellectual growth takes on new dimensions in contemporary approaches to intervention in child's play in school and home. The push for return to play in early childhood and the dynamic utility of play intervention strategies provide the basic keys to other significant dimensions of young children's intellectual and social/emotional growth for teachers and parents.

Play Intervention: Some Approaches and Strategies

Play intervention can make sound contributions to the young child's imaginative, intellectual, social/emotional and language growth. Given the importance of play intervention to development, children of all ages can benefit from its use. In working with and intervening in children's play, teachers and parents approach children with aims of observing and interpreting it and them employing selective strategies to encourage and facilitate playing actions and activities. By observing and interpreting children's play as baseline criteria for intervening in play routines, teachers and parents can follow and use the relevant suggestions proposed by Curry and

Arnaud and Pellegrini on interpreting play in their respective articles in this issue. For example, the helpful model for the dimensions of social play as proposed by Parten (1932) suggests that play unfolds along a continuum from onlooker or unoccupied to solitary, parallel, associative, and cooperative play.

Briefly, play at the onlooker level is characterized by children's watching the actions and activities of others, objects, and situations. Solitary play is characterized by children's verbal and/or motor play with themselves; the attributes of parallel play are individual and personal motor and/or verbal involvement of children with no genuine social interaction. The youngsters may be sitting side-by-side or in group settings. Associative play is characterized by children interacting with each other at low and superficial levels of interaction. Last, play at the cooperative level is characterized by meaningful communication between children who plan, define and assign their play roles and proceed to carry them out in social group settings.

Unioning Parten's approach, which gives a baseline for observing and interpreting play routines of young children, with selected strategies used by adults to encourage the levels of play, a usable intervention model is possible. The strategies that can be employed by teachers and parents to intervene in, and thereby encourage, solitary, parallel, associative, and cooperative child's play are: (a) time and space; (b) adult guidance; (c) play materials; (d) boundaries; and, (e) roles played.

The first strategy, time and space, asks teachers and parents to provide time in the daily schedule and enough space in the environment for children to play. The second strategy, called adult guidance, requires teachers and parents to sensitively offer oral language prompts as they play (e.g., "I wonder if baby wants some milk to drink!") and direct involvement cues (e.g.,

"That was really delicious!" says Mrs. Mack as she pretends to eat the ubiquitious birthday cake). Play materials, the third strategy, focuses on providing a variety of play materials for youngsters to use in their play. For example, making materials available from each of the categories of constructional (e.g., blocks, tinkertoys, lincoln logs), instructional (e.g., nesting cubes, puzzles), real materials (e.g., sand, water, navy beans, wood) and toys (e.g., trucks, dolls) gives variety and provides the children with opportunities to choose those that they want to use in their play routines.

The fourth strategy that teachers and parents use to intervene in children's play is boundaries. In using this strategy of boundaries, adults show youngsters, through demonstration and practice, how to enter and leave play situations. Play is facilitated as youngsters enter group play routines, perhaps, by observing and easing into them, rather than by breaking into the routines and demanding, "I want to play!" The final strategy, roles played, askes teachers and parents to let the youngsters decide upon their own play themes and define and assign their own roles. Adults can also, at times, suggest some play themes for specific instructional purposes. In addition, this strategy focuses on children rotating roles in the play episode, playing it again and making sure that all of them have the opportunity to participate.

Using Parten's approach to observe and interpret play behaviors and the five teacher and parent strategies for facilitating play provides a complete intervention model for use with young children playing in a variety of ways. The following section gives examples of using this intervention approach and strategies in school and home settings.

Play Intervention: Some Examples

The following examples, which illustrate intervention strategies, require

teachers and parents to observe and interprete the level at which the youngsters are playing. Effectively using the strategies with them at that level is the natural, resultant outcome of observing and interpreting.

Onlooker Play. Watching others play can become a stimulating developmental and learning experience. First, the youngster decides for himself which play group, action or activity he wants to observe. Then, using the time and space strategy, the youngster may decide to spend five to eight minutes or longer watching one or more activities in varying settings. To accommodate the onlooker as well as the player, particular areas of the classroom are alloted to play routines of the youngsters. Although the requirements of space depend on type and kind of onlooker play, designing particular play areas of the classroom as play areas reinforces the importance of the child's play. Here, it is important to remember that the time and space used appropriately in onlooker play stimulates the child to play creatively on his own.

Second, in using the strategy of adult guidance, the alert teacher or parent keeps one eye upon the onlooker and the other on the players. Onlooker's reactions to: (a) conversation; (b) objects; (c) actions; and, (d) themes in the play episode provide valuable clues about the youngster's areas of interest and familiarity. The adult's questions, comments and enthusiatic responses encourage the onlooker and player to sustain interest in the play. For instance, the child smiles broadly and chuckles while watching two peers as they "roll" make-believe apples and bananas from play dough and pretend to nibble on them. In guiding the onlooker, you can focus his attention on particular aspects of the pretend by saying, for example, "Bobby and Jema are pretending to eat the tasty fruit. Doesn't it taste delicious!" Or, the onlooker may cover his eyes while the cookie monster puppet attacks the Ernie puppet. You could comment, "I wonder how

Ernie feels!" Guidance encourages the onlooker to think about particular aspects of the play he is observing and maximizes the potential for him to join the play routines. The third intervention strategy is the use of play materials. In onlooker play, the youngster watches a set of blocks being used in a variety of ways, for example. A block becomes a truck, charging down the freeway. Later, the onlooker notes that the block is a frog, sitting on a lillypad. Seeing many new uses for familiar toys, and conversely discovering that many toys can represent familiar themes, the youngsters sees one object substituted for another. Careful, perceptive listening and observing of the youngster, while in the onlooker and in other daily-occurring roles and situations, informs the caretaker as to the youngster's readiness for watching and using different play materials.

Boundaries, the entering and leaving of play situations, is the fourth strategy. Its use varies widely with the age of the onlooker. Some will enter and leave the play setting; others will remain for longer periods of time and perhaps even join the players. Boundaries for the onlooker should remain flexible so that the child may come and go as he pleases.

The final strategy for use with the onlooker concerns the roles played by the participants. In the interest of the onlooker, as well as the players, variety in both language and visual experiences is heightened when the young players rotate roles and inject fresh themes. Although the participant's ideas remain foremost, the adult nonetheless suggests a variation upon a theme or character portrayal at times. For instance, youngsters flying to the moon can, in addition, fly to mars or around the world.

Solitary Play. The time and space strategy for the solitary player is an important school and home consideration. The child's rate of intellectual growth is enhanced through provision of a regular, daily scheduled time

for play. The solitary player becomes engrossed with his individual exploration and personal arrangement of the toys. Solitary players require time to understand their play routines as they enact them. The size of the space for solitary players is determined by the child's play themes and areas of interest. When the room is partitioned into separate play areas, (for example, large muscle, housekeeping or instructional toys), the child is encouraged and reinforced for playing accordingly in each area.

Using the guidance strategy as the solitary player, for example, progresses from the toy dishes to the pirate ship and costume corner to the painting area, the adult's role is mainly one of attentive observation. Reflecting the child's play themes and transitions, as well as the emotions and statements portrayed, you encourage and motivate the child at play. While the youngster climbs on the top step, holding a twisted coat hanger and shouting, "I'll find the buried treasure!" you use the guidance strategy by saying, for example, "I wonder where Captain Hook can hunt for the treasure!" Careful and accurate reflections of the child's play themes and verbalizations are necessary; occasional summary or intent statements are in order for the guidance strategy to be effectively used in solitary play. You can say for instance, "You're really interested in pirates and ships today. You're excited about the story of Peter Pan we heard (or saw on TV)!" Stepping beyond the simple reflective mode, you can also use modeling and within-role suggestions as guidance strategies for the solitary player. For example, you can hold up a Miss Piggy puppet as the child manipulates Kermit the frog. You squeek, "Kermit, let's go to the dance tonight!" as you model the conservation between the two puppets. Within-role suggestions might include, for example, "Andy, can you show Miss Piggy how Kermit can dance?" or "Let's dress the animals for the fancy party!"

Third, the use of the strategy of play materials in solitary play is based on the child's interest and past experiences. Introduction of familiar

play materials is recommended for younger or new solitary players. Representational toys such as toy cars, dolls, and buildings are best at first; non-representational toys such as wood pieces, and fabric scraps are used by the more mature solitary player. Boundaries, the fourth strategy for the solitary player, are individual and very personal. Cries of, "You can't play with me!" are common with the solitary playing child. The child's attention becomes focused on himself and the play theme to the exclusion of all others. The adult's job is to make these boundaries more permeable, flexible and less static by providing avenues for other children to enter into the world of the solitary player. For example, by commenting to the solitary player that, "Candy has a truck that could help you dig up the sand with your steam shovel!", your complimentary statements regard the boundaries of solitary play but yet soften them enough to permit another to play.

In using the fifth strategy, roles played, solitary-playing youngsters are free to choose their own character roles. The adult may suggest minor theme variations following those of the onlooker. Occasional use of modeling and within-play roles again helps to sustain and expand the youngster's interest. Role identity, consequent language growth, and a greater understanding of characterization and uses of objects result from the solitary players personalized choice of roles.

Parallel Play. With the strategy of time and space, young children benefit from playing near each other. Because play themes and objects change rapidly, and often without warning for parallel players, you should expect that time periods will be used creatively, actively and in a variety of ways. Providing open space which allows the youngsters, for instance, to march in a one-man band, as well as a small private space for block building are equally important for parallel play. As they parallel play, they will be within hearing and

seeing range of one another. These time and space strategies provide for the assimilation of new themes and ideas. The second strategy, guidance, is necessary for parallel play. In using the strategy in parallel play, the adult's commenting occasionally about the play of each child encourages and reinforces play patterns. For example, three year old Heidi grabs the stuffed giraffe and scolds, "You've been naughty, Jeremy! Now, you must go to bed without any chocolate cake!" Four year old Alonzo, holding a stuffed unicorn, is soon overheard saying, "Jeremy giraffe is in bed! He was naughty at dinner time!" At this point, you can remark to both youngsters, "Maybe Jeremy and the unicorn can play blocks tomorrow!" By introducing new ideas indirectly, you guide them to extend and discover patterns and sequences in their own play. In addition, the children hear and observe novel uses of familiar objects, resulting in vocabulary, language and creativity advances.

In parallel play, representational toys, which maximize the play materials category--dress-up clothing, dolls and vehicle toys--are ideal. These toys quickly spark imagination of the parallel players because they have functional uses which can be easily modeled. Whenever possible, purchasing at least two similar or identical sets of each toy assists children in the development of parallel play. Children in parallel play can use the same type of object which contributes to their play as their needs arise. Boundaries, the fourth strategy for parallel play, are more flexible than those of solitary play. Parallel players do interact freely with one another. And, even though they more commonly interact "at one another," they move independently in and out of these routines. The "roles played" strategy in parallel play proceeds best when the adult follows the child's lead in player assignments. Children of similar interests and ages can facilitate each other's parallel play and role assignments.

Associative and Cooperative Play. Both in the center and home you can establish a background rich in opportunities for dramatic and sociodramatic play. Dramatic and sociodramatic play involves elements of both make-believe and imitation. Adult explanations, direct guidance and cooperation assume larger roles in these than with the other types of social play. For example, compared with other play stages, you can, in associative and cooperative play: (a) explain your reasons for actions; (b) break down complex actions into simple units of action; (c) answer child's questions concerning play choices; and, (d) directly guide and model desirable play patterns. Additionally, describing wishes, future and past events and reading and discussing stories with the child are additional tools of dramatic and sociodramatic play. In using the first intervention the strategy of time and space, special places and times allotted for play welcome the children to play situations. Time and space set the stage for actions as well. The amount of time and space used in associative and cooperative play increases as compared with other types of play. These greater amounts of space and time are needed for children to use a variety of play actions, try out novel activities and go into greater depth and more detailed elaboration of their play.

Adult guidance, the second intervention strategy, provides for enhancing child's play and his repertorie of play actions. For example, encouraging positive social relationships will favorably influence the child's cooperation with peers in play. Guiding the child to play with different children and reinforcing the positive behaviors increases the child's social readiness and ability. Your verbal comments encourage the child to handle the objects imitatively during the playtime. Dramatic and sociodramatic play are stimulated by using suggestions, such as, "See the cars, trains, and buildings! Perhaps you and Heather could play 'big city' with them!" and,

"Look at the pretty new doll! Go and see if Elizabeth and Adam will help you to rock and feed her!" Speech, the central tool in dramatic and sociodramatic play, becomes a handy substitute for elements which the child wishes to include in the play. Through guidance using modeling, the adult enhances and stimulates the child's role-taking ability. For example, you might say, "Peter, let's pretend that the table is a bus. We'll crawl underneath it and take a trip to the dairy farm!" With these suggestions, the props and scenery become alive and are real to the players. The adult communicates enthusiasm and acceptance both verbally and nonverbally throughout the sequence. Using the strategies of nodding, exciting clapping, stooping to the children's level, interjecting comments, questions, and suggestions, and acting as a play episode participant, the adult joins in the fun.

The third strategy is play materials. In order for children to engage in dramatic and sociodramatic play they need varied toys and play materials. For example, cardboard squares, foil stars, empty paper towel rolls, empty shoe boxes, and crayons can all be used by youngsters in their sociodramatic play. With these materials, Philip, Sonya, Nancy, Carrie, and John, for example, begin to play "mailman!" They say, "Who will be our mail carrier? We'll need a dog that barks!" They plan the roles and use the materials and carry out the enactments of the "mailman." Each child interacts, converses, and moves according to roles. Body contact with other sociodramatic players as well as physical arrangement of the props and objects enables them to nonverbally communicate. Resultant social growth, language development and event sequencing are the rewards of using varied play materials in dramatic and sociodramatic play.

Boundaries in dramatic and sociodramatic play begin to change and are more flexible than at other stages of play. Rather than constructing between themselves and their play, the children welcome involvement and

participation from other youngsters. By merely suggesting that they want to play in a sociodramatic play episode, additional youngsters are included for the contributions that they can make to the group.

In using the strategy of roles in dramatic and sociodramatic play, the youngster includes great detail. As the children elaborate and completely describe the characters, they make their dramatic and sociodramatic play routines lively. With play at this level, the youngsters can rotate roles and enact the same episode over and over again. With each enactment of the same episode, the roles, play materials, and outcomes of the play episode differ markedly. Role changes coincide with, and facilitate, the youngsters developmental needs and interests.

In sum, whether children are playing in onlooker, solitary, and parallel fashion or whether the play is associative or cooperative, your role in the play is paramount. The adult in the center or the home is truly one of the child's most influential play and learning motivators. A role, so filled with potential, must not be considered lightly.

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